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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the state of the art in assessment of African American children with possible handicaps. He asserts that changes must be made regarding the goal of assessment, the role of the assessors, the process of assessment, the criterion for validity, and the preparation of assessors. He further suggests that the problem with testing is neither bias, nor fairness, nor discrimination; rather, it is a problem of validity. Valid tests must be developed, he states, which are also culturally sensitive to identify the actual problems of African American children and provide them appropriate services. He singles out the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA) as an example of testing alternatives which do not actually address the major flaws of standardized tests. (CL)

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"Non-Discriminatory" Testing of African-American Children

Asa G. Hilliard III

(Council for Exceptional Children, National Conference on the Exceptional Black Child, New Orleans, February 1981)

I wish to discuss with you the subject of non-discriminatory testing of Black children. Several authors such as Al Sullivan (1972) and Levine (1976) have presented compelling material to show the close association between periods of progress for oppressed groups and the increase of standardized testing. In the case of African-American children, the real history of standardized testing begins in 1954 with the Supreme Court's decision in Brown versus the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas, which mandated the desegregation of schools. Indeed, there is a good argument for dating the rapid growth of certain special education programs from that date as well, when we note the disproportionately large number of African-American children who began to be labeled as "educable mentally retarded", and when we note the large share of special education clients who fall into the category of mental retardation, and later, "speech disorders". The consequences of standardized testing for African-Americans are well known to all of us here. Because of extreme racism, bias, and error in testing, some African-American educators and a few of their white colleagues have been forced to become preoccupied more with developing defenses for the children against pseudo-assessment than with the refinement of professional practice so that children who are truly in need of services can be provided with those services. To identify as retarded, as speech-impaired, as language-deficient, or as a slow reader, someone who is not, is to identify for unnecessary treatment persons who are

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quite sound and healthy. On the basis of data from invalid tests, masses of African-American children have been so misplaced in school and have been prevented from entry into certain curricula and institutions. They have been referred erroneously for unnecessary therapies, and have been given information which gives a false picture of who they are.

It becomes critically important to use the right language and labels in testing and in assessment. Otherwise the true nature of our problems will never become apparent. For example, the real problem in testing and assessment for African-American children is not to find "non-discriminatory" instruments, or to find "non-biased" instruments, or even to find "fair" instruments. The real problem is to find valid instruments. Discrimination, bias, and unfairness are merely symptoms which tell us that tests are invalid. For example, no one can quarrel with a test which discriminates between those who exhibit some specific learning deficiency and those who do not. The quarrel comes when the possession of European culture is equated with normative cognitive functioning. It is then that inappropriate and invalid "discrimination" becomes the problem.

As Dr. Johnson has indicated, the name which is used for any group of people is all-important. But what we must realize is that it is all-important not simply because such labels as "minority", "culturally different", "culturally deprived", and "culturally disadvantaged" are insulting, but because, from a scientific perspective, they provide no useful information about the behavior of groups of people. A "minority" has no history and culture, since the pool which makes up the "minority" in America is always changing. The important thing about an African-American child is not that he or she may be a part of a smaller sized group than a European-American normative group. The important thing about the African-American child is

the specific nature of the experience which he or she has had in terms of the development of language, of general information, of values, and of problem solving strategies. To allow African-American children to be referred to as "minority" children is to set up a situation in which it would be completely impossible ever to explain their performance on alleged measures of intellect, speech, language, development, et cetera. I will illustrate this problem specifically in a moment.

Standardized testing and assessment in general does not yet offer a significant vehicle for the improvement of the quality of instruction for children. To the extent that standardized testing and assessment is valid at all, it tends to be so when applied to clearly observable physical behaviors. As we have approached the measurement of intellectual functions, commonly used standardized testing and assessment have been quite immature and underdeveloped as contrasted for example with Piagetian descriptions of cognitive development. More important is the fact that American education has yet to distinguish itself in the service of the masses, especially the masses of Black people. One would think that with all our psychologists and psychometrists, more than in all the rest of the world combined, and with all the money which has been spent on psychological research and psychometric development, education for Black children would be a model for emulation throughout the world. Yet, even though we have failed to document the work of many thousands of African-American teachers in many all-Black schools, many of us in this room can testify regarding numerous cities where the quality of education for African-American children has actually declined almost in direct proportion to the provision of supposedly more adequate educational services in supposedly integrated school settings. We need to be constantly reminded of the things which Ron Edmonds is now teaching the

nation. He shows that there are many ordinary schools which seem to have no trouble in producing high levels of academic achievement for African-American children without turning them into patients or specimens.

Let me try to be more specific about what is required for the appropriate and valid assessment of African-American children. First of all, it is my opinion that we cannot be, nor should we be, in the position of opposition to valid testing and assessment. Quite the contrary, we should be strong supporters of valid assessment. Our war must be against racism, incompetence, and error. We must do battle against these triplets. However, the general state of the art in standardized testing and assessment for educational improvement is so bankrupt that a fundamental revolution in professional practice is required, not only for African-American children but for all other children as well. I can summarize the changes which are needed very quickly. We must change the goal of assessment, the role of the assessors, the process of assessment, the criterion for validity, and the preparation of assessors. Specifically, historically the basic goal of educational assessment has been to make predictions, to forecast, to make educational placements based upon forecasts, to describe the learner's condition, which implicitly is presumed to be unalterable, and to match educational services to this presumed unalterable condition. It is these assumptions which have led to the use of educators as agents of social and educational stratification. Educators usually function to help people to find their "place". A more appropriate goal for assessment must be to change the condition of the learner through valid assessment and educational interventions, for those rare cases where such assessment and intervention are required. The role of the assessor must be changed from one of distant, alien, uninvolved observer to one who seeks actively to test, not the learn-

er's present status, but the nature of interventions which are required to change that status. In other words, the educational assessor must be as good at teaching as at the formal process of assessment itself. To accomplish this move, the assessment process itself must use the experiences of the client as the raw material for testing. The criterion for the validity of testing instruments or processes must be the measure of the capacity of such instruments or processes for making a contribution to positive changes in learner outcomes. It is unworthy of educators to call for assessment, participate in assessment, or accept assessment results which merely confirm, anoint, or label the obvious. Finally, where African-American children are concerned, no assessor can be completely skillled and no assessment instrument can be completely valid, until such time as assessment and instruments are rooted in the deepest understanding of African-American history and culture. Time will not permit my providing more than one explicit example of the relevance of African-American history and culture to the question of valid assessment. These are not simply matters of ethnic pride.

Let's take a precise example. According to Winifred Vass, a review of the statistics on the slave trade will show that the bulk of the slave trade occurred before Americans were heavily involved. America, which got only about 5%, did not become involved in the slave trade until approximately the last fifty years of the trade. By that time, nearly 95% of the slaves taken from Africa had already been delivered to other parts of the world, primarily Brazil and the West Indies. A minuscule number of the total were taken to Canada and to Europe. The importance of these facts is that the most easily accessible parts of the African continent were depopulated first, specifically West Africa. By the time the Americans entered the slave trade, the bulk of the slaves were being taken from Central and Eastern Africa

(Angola and Mozambique). These slaves spoke languages from the core of the African language family known as Bantu. Students of Bantu such as Vass (1979), who spent almost fifty years in Africa and is fluent in Tshiluba, a Bantu language, are able to recognize in the speech of both Black and White Americans the retentions of features of Bantu speech, specifically phonological retentions. We may also document the retention of grammatical features as well. It would take too much time to detail here the number of Bantu retentions which appear in the names of towns and cities throughout the South, or which appear in the songs and folklore of the South and in the general vocabulary of Americans. More important for special educators is the need to understand and use a knowledge of African linguistic antecedents as a base for analyzing the normal linguistic patterns of African-American communities, particularly those communities which have been little involved with mainstream American culture, even over the course of nearly 400 years. The special educator in speech therapy must be able to distinguish between "abnormal" and "normal" speech patterns. In pathological terms, tests which use cultural material to measure "normality" and "abnormality" must be related to an appropriate normative cultural referent. Therefore, a sophisticated and well trained diagnostician who seeks to determine if pathology exists in the speech of an African-American child must be familiar with African-American language and culture, and even its local community variations.

One of the largest categories in special education has been that of "speech disorders". In many cities, as much as 50% of the speech disorders fall under the area of "articulation problems". This was reported in the figures on Head Start handicapped children two years ago. The diagnosis of articulation disorders has been in part dependent upon the identification of "abnormal" phonemic patterns. And this is the crux of the matter. Many

African-American children have been labeled as having speech disorders when they are doing nothing more than exhibiting "normal" linguistic forms for their communities, of which their assessors are ignorant. Not only does the ignorance of African-American cultural and historical material set the stage for misdiagnosis of pathology by untrained and insensitive professionals; the ignorance of the principle of cultural variation in linguistic systems sets the stage for an inappropriate and unjustified treatment of common English patterns as an esthetic and linguistic norm rather than as a simple common means of communication.

Thomas Hilliard has pointed out in his 1980 testimony to the California Licensing Commission Examination Board that current professional training programs leave clinical psychologists professionally certified but culturally retarded. This is true for professional educators as well. It is cultural retardation which allows professionals to use universal cultural standards with diverse cultural populations for assessing speech pathology. An appropriate discriminatory standard would take into account that whenever a person is utilizing the speech patterns of his or her own community, though that may be neither economically nor politicaly beneficial, neither is it indicative of pathology. Appropriate sensitivity will permit the professional to determine that such a situation is one for the teacher and not the therapist.

IQ psychometrists who are not culturally retarded would realize immediately the folly of designing instruments to measure "general information" and "vocabulary" with a universal instrument, as do most tests of "intelligence", when as far as these two dimensions are concerned there is no universal culture. There is no universal "general information" or "vocabulary". Specific information and vocabulary must be taught.

"Alternative" tests are not needed for African-American children. Valid tests are needed. I am pleased to be able to say something today regarding the model for successful and appropriate testing and assessment in special education.

I have long been a critic of IQ testing. Among other things, I have been critical for the reason that no mental functions are described by those tests, nor have I been able to find information from these tests which is useful in the design of pedagogy. Piaget, a student of Binet, the first IQ test developer, has been persuasive over the past few years with his work in the description of cognitive development. Notably it was what we might call his culturally sensitive approach to observation which produced insights about cognitive development. In other words, he learned what he did from an examination of the unique patterns of diverse subjects. Reuven Feuerstein, a student of Piaget, has over the past 25 years and more been interested in responding to the unique behavior of individuals in the assessment process. He has designed a dynamic assessment system which he calls Learning Potential Assessment (1979). Based upon information learned from the application of the Learning Potential Assessment Device (LPAD), specifical instructional prescriptions are made and an instructional program is offered to remediate deficiencies. Feuerstein calls his program Instrumental Enrichment. The combination of these two things has been shown over the past 25 years to have the capacity for producing dramatic changes in the actual cognitive structure of learners, changes which are long lasting and which provide for transfer. Feuerstein speaks not of mentally retarded children but of retarded performers. He speaks not of prediction, not of the testing of cognitive status, but of cognitive modifiability. Feuerstein has demonstrated that learners may be approached independent of their diagnostic categories

using the LPAD and IE, and that great leaps in cognitive performance can be made by learners who have been thought to be beyond hope. The leaps are generalizable and are at what Jensen calls Level II learning. Time will not permit a full and detailed description of this remarkable work. Simply let me say that it meets almost all the assessment criteria that I mentioned earlier. It changes the goals, the role, the process, and the criterion for testing and assessment. It does so with clearly demonstrable extraordinary results. I know of no assessment and intervention strategies which even begin to compare with Feuerstein's profound work in theory, practice, or results.

In the wake of court decisions and legislative pressures, the major testing companies and academic researchers have been hard at work attempting to develop "alternatives" to existing standardized tests, especially standardized tests of intelligence. Since in the main these researchers and test makers failed to examine the fundamental assumptions upon which the whole testing movement has been built, the "alternatives" have been no better, and frequently have been much worse, than the tests which they are to replace. I wish to issue the strongest possible warning about those who seek a quick fix to remedy a bad situation merely by changing the names and packaging of tests, or by making minor modifications in existing assessment procedures. I wish to make specific mention of SOMPA as an example. It has been presented and sold as a tool for the "non-discriminatory" assessment of "minority children". Perhaps SOMPA is the answer to the testing of "minority children", whoever they are. However, in my opinion, where African-American children are concerned, SOMPA is nothing more than a sophisticated way of adding a 15-point "handicap" to the IQ test scores of Black children by giving them credit for

some of their daily experience. Significantly, SOMPA is published by the publishers of the Wechsler and includes the same old Wechsler IQ test in its battery. While SOMPA may be somewhat reliable, I am unable to determine that it has any instructional validity or utility for African-American children. I see no interface between SOMPA and instructional processes which result in positive changes for children, nor do I see how there can ever be such an interface. That is because SOMPA seeks to remedy the testing problems by correcting the symptom of the problems, which is the cultural inappropriateness of the questions. The problem with testing is neither bias, nor fairness, nor discrimination. It is a problem of validity. We must not allow educators to be misled or African-American children to be used once more for profit with this new instrument which in my opinion offers no prospect for telling us how to change education.

Where the valid assessment of African-American children is concerned, we have two major problems. First, we must use valid assessment to remedy the damage which has been done by invalid assessment of millions of normal African-American children due to racism, bias, and error. Second, we must develop highly sophisticated culturally sensitive valid tests to insure that African-American children who have bona fide problems receive the services to which they are entitled.

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